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ABSTRACT

In a reminiscence of his first year of teaching (in 1946), a teacher notes: (1) his complete unpreparedness for the task of teaching 11th grade English to 35 teenagers; (2) that his activities were a crude form of testing, and certainly not teaching; (3) that the goodwill and helpful suggestions of the English department chairman were decisive in his decision to remain a teacher in spite of that disastrous first term; and (4) that there were many simple things he could have done with the text his class labored through, such as personalize the text or read portions of it aloud. (SR)

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"That First Year"

Imagine walking into an 11th grade English class in a Brooklyn Vocational High School, given a basic text, The Autobiography of Lincoln Steffens, and told to teach a class of 35 teen-agers, all of whom had more important things on their mind. The students major academic interests were in "shop" classes, later to be known as "Industrial Arts." In their opinion, the status of the English teacher ranked just below that of Attendance Officer. My preparation for this task was four years as an English major at Colby College, an M.A. in English literature, and three years in the army. With all due respect to my college instructors, I was not prepared for this assignment. I was given the job because classes had to be covered, and I was available. The time was September 1946 and World War II and its aftermath were still the prime topics of discussion. The per diem salary for a substitute teacher was $10.25. I took the job.

If anyone says that little or no progress has been made in the areas of teacher preparation over the past forty years, let me list some of the educational practices I was not aware of as I faced my first class : motivational techniques, readiness for the lesson, relating pupils' experience to the text, knowledge of reading levels, individualizing instruction, levels of questioning, and last, and far from least, classroom management. At best, I was totally unprepared. I distributed the texts

with little or no instruction. I was glad that I had enough copies for the class. What I do remember was that one young man ruffled a few pages of the text, leaned back in his seat, and without waiting to be recognized, said, "Hey teach, I can't read this book. The words are too close to the page." I assume that it was his way of saying that there were too many words on each page or that the vocabulary or general appearance of the book were so formidable that he didn't stand a chance. Today, I would probably refer to the problem as his "frustration level." Or perhaps there was a deeper, more subtle meaning to his statement, i.e., the words would remain embedded on the page, never to reach those portions of the brain that control the reading process. All I knew at that time was to assign a chapter or two, have the students answer prepared questions, and go over the answers the following day. It was not teaching, only the crudest form of testing. Naturally, my first term was a disaster. How I got through that period, I'll never know. Perhaps the fact that I was a veteran, had the usual collection of army stories, and was only a few years older than my students helped. But I wasn't a teacher. I was a physical presence trying to keep my 10th and 11th graders occupied one day at a time. I didn't even realize that some of the Lincoln Steffens' books were first editions, published in 1931. I should have held on to them.

To give another example of my complete ignorance or lack of preparation for the job, I'll try to describe my first observation by the chairman of the English Department. He told me that he would be coming to observe a lesson so I was prepared. I thought I would try something different so I selected - poetry. The poem was "High Flight," very popular in high school English anthologies at that time. It was a sensitive and

emotional reaction to the wonders of flight, made particularly so by the poet's tragic death at the age of 19 in a training flight. For those unfamiliar with the poem, I reproduce it here:

HIGH FLIGHT
by John Gillespie Magee, Jr.

Oh! I have slipped the surly bonds of Earth,
And danced the skies on laughter-silvered wings;
Sunward I've climbed, and joined the tumbling mirth
Of sun-split clouds - and done a hundred things
You have not dreamed of - wheeled and soared and swung
High in the sunlit silence. Hov'ring there,
I've chased the shouting wind along, and flung
My eager craft through footless halls of air ...
Up, up the long delirious, burning blue
I've topped the wind-swept heights with easy grace,
Where never lark or even eagle flew -
And while with silent, lifting mind I've trod
The high untrespassed sanctity of space,
Put out my hand and touched the face of God.

I began by reading the poem aloud. I tried to give it my best dramatic performance, and when completed, put the text down and asked what I consider to be the most stupid opening question of all (I shrink in embarrassment as I recall the words): "How many of you liked this poem?" Of course, the answer was complete silence. My lesson plan was destroyed. No one ever told me that the worst possible way to stimulate discussion was to begin with a question that called for a "Yes" or "No" reply. So I stammered, groped, and sweated for fifty minutes while the Chairman, head down, scribbled furiously in his notebook in the back of the room. It was a nightmare that still recurs in different forms, but all relating to lack of preparation and no response from the group in front of me.

I was ready to say "good-by" to my brief teaching career. What saved and ultimately encouraged me was the response and good will of the

English Chairman, Mr. Abraham Wilner. During the oral review of my "lesson," he calmly described all the weak and questionable procedures and made suggestions that would raise my rating from "complete fiasco" to "fortunately, there were no casualties." However, his general attitude and manner were encouraging. He had seen worse, though I couldn't imagine where. The surprise came when I received the written evaluation. Somehow, he managed to find some good things to say about the effort, preparation, concern, and potential of a beginning teacher. Truthfully, I saw no relationship between his written report and the actual lesson. They must have needed "bodies" badly that year. But I did get the needed reassurance and encouragement. Talk about decisive moments in one's career. If not for Abe Wilner, I would have quit that day. A written evaluation by a humane individual who had some understanding of what a beginning teacher was going through made the difference. Thanks, Abe.

Forty-three years later, I look back and think of the things - simple things - I could have done during that first year. I could have told my students something about the life of Lincoln Steffens before distributing the text. I could have said something about his career as a crusading journalist and editor who uncovered corruption in city governments. I could have given them a few dramatic details about "muckraking." I could have "personalized" history rather than dealing with abstractions. At the very least, I could have read portions of the book aloud to them - selections that had some relevance to their lives. Oh, the things I didn't do! I shudder when I think about it. I know it's too late to apologize to the students in my English classes at East New York Vocational High School, but I do so publicly. I just hope I didn't do too much harm during that first year of teaching.